

Internet Workshop and Blog Publishing: Meeting Student (and Teacher) Learning Needs to Achieve Best Practice in the Twenty-First-Century Social Studies Classroom

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Social studies educators are responsible for successfully teaching students the knowledge, skills, and values necessary to be effective citizens. The National Council for the Social Studies urges educators to design technology-enhanced experiences that address social studies content and prepare students for effective citizenship. In this paper, we give examples from a piratical unit designed for a fourth-grade social studies classroom to highlight the role digital technology can play in enhancing social studies teaching and learning. We use Internet workshops as structures for students to meaningfully research social studies content, and we use blogs as technological tools to publish and showcase authentic student work, and ultimately, to develop students' higher order thinking skills and creativity.

Keywords: digital technology, Internet workshop, blog, social studies, pirates, research

Social studies educators have many responsibilities in successfully teaching students the knowledge, skills, and values necessary to be effective citizens. Exemplary programs are expected, among other things, to teach students how to:

1. acquire, organize, interpret, and communicate information;
2. process information to investigate questions, develop knowledge, and draw conclusions;
3. generate and evaluate well-informed, alternative approaches to problem-solving and decision-making; and
4. interact responsibly with others.

Such teaching is particularly effective if student learning decisions and actions are embedded in meaning-rich activities (National Council for the Social Studies 2008).

Technology is perceived as a potentially significant tool in achieving these instructional aims, *if* it is integrated into social studies curriculum and instruction (Martorella 1997). That is, with careful planning, teachers can use instructional technologies to develop learning experiences that prepare students for effective citizenship. Effective integration is seen when technology enables learning that

1. is extended beyond that achieved without technology;
2. is focused on social studies content and skills and not the technology;
3. clarifies relationships among science, technology, and society; and
4. enhances the skills, knowledge, and values of good citizenship (Mason et al. 2000).

As professors in a master's level reading-education program, we regularly interact with experienced classroom teachers who are committed to their students and would like to implement the best practices described above were it not for a variety of barriers. First, many of their students cannot read the social studies textbook allocated to their grade level. Second, they often lack the in-class resources to support authentic knowledge and skill learning beyond the textbook. Third, technology in their classrooms is limited to one or a few computers, although they all have access to an under-used school computer lab. Finally, they have little experience integrating technology into their instruction and consequently are hesitant to do so. It is with those real world challenges and best practice goals in mind that we have begun helping teachers integrate the use of Internet workshops and blog publishing in their classrooms. Neither technology is resource intensive or intimidating to new classroom technology users, and both have proven to be highly effective for helping teachers get started in using technology to achieve social studies goals.

In this article, we give examples from a unit on pirates, the Piratical Internet Workshop, designed for a fourth-grade social studies classroom (Frye, Trathen, and Wilson 2009) to highlight the role digital technology can play in enhancing social studies teaching and learning. The focus of the piratical unit is on the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS 1994) Thematic Strand II—*Time, Continuity and Change*, and we address several specific social studies themes: (1) the economic impact pirates and privateers had on American colonies; (2) the roles that pirates and privateers played in the wars between England and Spain, the American Revolutionary War, and the War of 1812; (3) the absolute and relative location of major landforms, bodies of water, and ports of call in the early Americas; and (4) the emergence of democratic practices among the pirates (e.g., the pirate's code—the Articles of Agreement).

We structure the unit into two sections. The first section is designed to assist students to meaningfully engage with Internet resources to search, read, gather, organize, evaluate, and discuss social studies content. We use the Internet workshop framework developed by Leu as a way to structure students' activities to enhance learning (Leu 2002). The second section of the unit is designed to provide an opportunity for students to refine, display, publish, and share social studies content with others. We have found that classroom blogs provide a safe and easy mechanism for those kinds of public displays of students' learning. Moreover, publication validates student learning since the audience is wider than a single teacher's grading scheme.

Section 1: Internet Workshop

In the Internet workshop, teachers create a research activity in which students are directed to specific Web sites to gather information, complete a research activity, and share the information with their classmates during a workshop format (Leu 2002). The workshop provides a scaffold and sup-

port for students as they gather and evaluate information. In addition, students become more independent learners, consumers, and producers of information in this teacher-structured learning environment. The workshop leverages the social nature of learning (Vygotsky 1962) and allows students to interact with social studies content in meaningful and memorable ways.

Leu (2002) delineates four steps in implementing the Internet workshop: teachers both locate sites and develop research activities, while students then complete research activities and share and exchange information. We describe each step below and then provide an example of an Internet workshop for an upper-elementary classroom.

Locating Internet sites

Although this may seem like a relatively easy task, locating child-friendly Web sites that students can easily read, navigate, and comprehend, and that provide accurate information can be more time-consuming than teachers sometimes anticipate. We recommend that you search for Internet sites that provide relevant and useful information written at a appropriate levels for your students. Once you have located your Web sites, set a bookmark for your students. By bookmarking the sites you have chosen, you guide your students to safe and valuable sites and help them use limited instructional time most efficiently. You may wish to explore social bookmarking options like *delicious* (<http://delicious.com/>), where users store, organize, and manage bookmarks of Web sites that they have found valuable. One particular advantage of social bookmarking for Internet workshops is the ability to write annotations for sites, which may assist student learning and use as well as remind teachers the following year of the kinds of information that are found at each site (see Figure 1).

Many teachers begin seeking useful Web sites with search engines that are child-friendly (i.e., written on a level most elementary students can read and understand

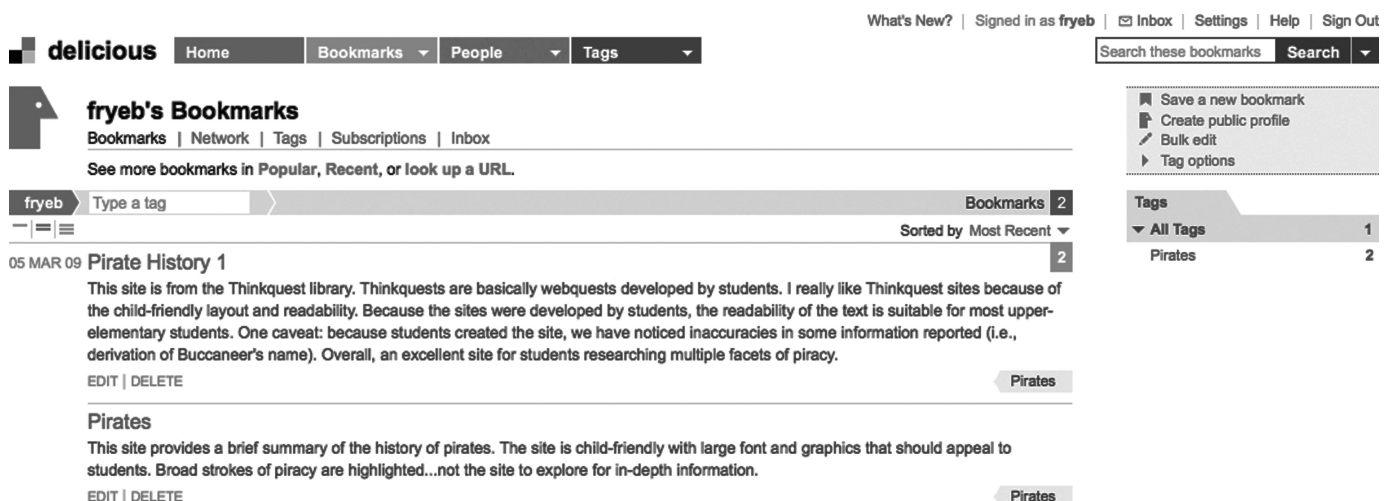


Fig. 1. Delicious annotated bookmark.

while providing appropriate content). A comprehensive list of Internet search engines for kids can be found at <http://www.ivyjoy.com/rayne/kidssearch.html>. If search engines seem too overwhelming, we suggest looking in more specific domains connected to respective content areas. Table 1 lists some of the Internet sites connected to social studies content that we have found most useful; the ones listed are extensive in both the breadth and depth of topics and are organized by one or more of the following criteria: content or topic, category, and grade level.

Child-friendly search engines and content directories provide the perfect venue to begin your Internet queries.

Designing the research activity

Once you have bookmarked the Web sites, the next step is to plan research activities linked directly to the goals of your unit. When designing the activities, keep in mind the multiple possible purposes of the Internet research: (1) introducing navigational strategies for exploring the Internet, (2) introducing students to relevant background knowledge, (3) developing specific content knowledge, and/or (4) developing critical literacies that aid students as they evaluate

Table 1. Social studies sites.

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- Thinkquest, <http://www.thinkquest.org/en/>
 - EdSitement, <http://edsitement.neh.gov/>
 - American Memory,
<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/index.html>
 - National Geographic for Kids,
<http://kids.nationalgeographic.com/>
 - National Geographic Xpeditions,
<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/>
 - Social Studies for Kids,
<http://www.socialstudiesforkids.com/>
 - PBS Teachers Recommended Social Studies Links,
<http://www.pbs.org/teachers/bookslinks/linkspages/socialstudies.html>
 - MarcoPolo (Thinkfinity) Resources,
<http://www.marcopolo-education.org/home.aspx>
 - Smithsonian Educational Resources,
<http://www.smithsonianeducation.org/>
 - New York Times Learning Network,
<http://www.nytimes.com/learning/>
-

information. Your goals for the workshop will guide your creation of the research activities, and it is common to have several goals in a single workshop. In Figure 2 we provide

This Internet workshop will introduce you to pirates. You are invited to explore information on the Internet. Take notes in your *Pirate Journal*. Come prepared to share your information at our workshop session.

Please answer the following questions:

1. Go to the bookmarks set for the following Web sites:
<http://www.isd12.org/bhe/Archives/Activities/Pirates/Pages/General/pirates.html>
<http://library.thinkquest.org/J0110360/history.htm>
Explore the information on pirates. In your words, what is a pirate? What was it like to live like a pirate? Give at least 3 specific examples.
2. Go to the bookmarks set for the following Web sites:
<http://www.rochedalss.eq.edu.au/pirates/pirate1.htm>
<http://library.thinkquest.org/J0110360/index.htm>
<http://www.isd12.org/bhe/Archives/Activities/Pirates/Pages/General/pirates.html>
<http://blindkat.hegewisch.net/blindkat/pirates/diff.html>

You will explore these sites and answer the following questions on your data retrieval chart (DRC). (See Figure 3.) This will help you keep the information organized.

Who were the pirates known as buccaneers? How was their name derived? In other words, how did they get their name? What were their other nicknames? When and where did they live?

3. Did you notice any differences in how the sites reported how the buccaneer's name was derived? Explain. Go back to your DRC and see if you can find information about the authors of each Web site. Please write that information under the heading "resources." How did you know where to go to answer the questions about the authors of the sites? What helped you locate that specific information?

Write down the strategies you used to find the authors of the Web sites. After evaluating this information, how would you say the buccaneer's name was derived?

4. Go to the bookmarks set for the following Web sites and read about privateers:
<http://www.pride2.org/NewPrideSite/MD/Lesson11/Lesson11.5.html>
<http://www.pride2.org/NewPrideSite/MD/Lesson11/Lesson11.12.html>
<http://blindkat.hegewisch.net/blindkat/pirates/diff.html>

Who were privateers? Who commissioned privateers? What is a Letter of Marque? Why were these letters issued? Do you think privateers were pirates, patriots, or both? Explain. Be ready to justify your response through a class debate.

Fig. 2. Piratical Internet workshop.

Resources	Who were the pirates known as buccaneers?	How did they get their name?	What were their other nicknames?	When and where did they live?
Rochdale site				
Thinkquest				
Pirates general information page				
Pirates of the Caribbean				

Fig. 3. Data retrieval chart (DRC) on Buccaneers.

sample questions from the Piratical Internet Workshop that address all four learning goals.

A navigational strategy may be as simple as helping students think of which buttons and links to “click” or as complex as integrating the use of hyperlinking to review multimedia data on multiple sites while annotating notes through a delicious bookmark. When introducing students to navigational strategies, it is important that the teacher be very familiar with the particular Internet site and plan specific questions about where information is and how students can find it. For example, question 3 in Figure 2 asks students to think through their navigation and to consider where they would locate information about the authors of the Web sites. To answer this question, students not only must think about the topic but also how and why they made a decision. This also can be a place to introduce navigational terms associated with using the browser toolbar such as *back*, *forward*, *stop*, *load*, *refresh*, *home*, *favorites*, *history*, *search*, and so on.

Before completing the Piratical Internet Workshop we designed, we recommend students complete an Internet workshop in which they learn *how* to locate information about the author(s) of a Web site (i.e., looking for *About Us*, *Contact Us*, *Philosophy*, *Background*, *Biography*, etc. on the Web page). Students use critical literacy skills as they learn to locate the information about the author of the Web site, evaluate the author’s credentials, synthesize the information to possibly determine the validity and reliability of the Web site, and communicate their findings.

To aid students in developing background knowledge for the unit, you may develop open-ended questions that direct students toward gathering information representing multiple viewpoints or sources on a topic or issue. Instead of seeking the “one, correct” answer, students explore the topic or issue, interpret the information, and choose which information to share during the workshop. This way, when students convene, everyone has an opportunity to contribute something they value having learned (see Figure 2, question 1). Engaging students in their learning in these ways increases motivation, broadens the conversation about background concepts, and deepens their understanding of core concepts.

To develop more specific content knowledge, you may choose more focused questions that lead to students later evaluating the information and using critical literacy strate-

gies (see Figure 2, questions 2 and 3). When your goal is to help students develop critical thinking, you may create factual-level questions in which students search for the answers by exploring different Internet sites. In the Piratical Internet Workshop, students explore four different sites that provide information on the derivation of the name *buccaneer*. Here, there are discrepancies presented in the information. Students evaluate the sites, determine the authors of the information, and then make informed decisions on how they believe the name *buccaneer* was derived.

Because Internet workshops are inquiry-based, students are constantly making discoveries and posing their own queries. They are reading, critically evaluating information, forming their own opinions, and engaging in discussions (workshops) in which they are encouraged to justify their opinions (see Figure 2, question 4).

Completing the research activity

Students typically complete the workshop in a computer lab or similar setting where multiple computers are available and an instructional technology coordinator can often assist in supporting student learning. If LCD projectors and/or Smart Boards are available, teachers can model the procedures of Internet workshop for their students. Teachers encourage collaboration and interaction between partners or small groups as they complete the workshop. If only one or two computers are available, then the teacher will need to schedule work sessions for individuals, partners, or small groups. We have found that most students require at least an hour of Internet investigation to complete workshops such as the piratical model presented here.

Sharing information in the workshop

Following the research, students gather to share and exchange information in a workshop environment. Most of the questions in Internet workshops are open-ended and encourage students to share interesting information that they choose, thereby limiting repetitive recurring “facts.” In the Piratical Internet Workshop, students share their information on pirates, discuss questions that arise during their investigations, and debate whether privateers are

pirates or patriots. Through these activities, students acquire a deeper understanding of the role that pirates played in Colonial America.

High-quality learning experiences like the Internet workshop can assist students in becoming capable consumers of technology-based information. However, teachers and students can also produce knowledge if they publish their findings and conclusions in classroom blogs. Blogs furnish dynamic, versatile, and inexpensive environments for publishing student work, not to mention teacher assignments, syllabi, announcements, and parent communications.

Section 2: Classroom Blogs

Blog is short for “Web log.” Simply put, blogs are easy-to-use Web sites that contain text, images, videos, and links to other Web sites. Bloggers, who post and update information on the blogs, do not need to be familiar with HTML (hyper-text markup language) to author text on a blog, and most blog technology is as easy to use as word-processing programs. Information is easily uploaded (i.e., sent from your computer) to the Internet, enabling it to be shared with a wider audience (e.g., children in other classrooms, families, accredited agencies). Blogging need cost nothing but your time to get started as long as you already have an Internet connection. We believe blogs are the perfect medium for educators to publish, share, and manage information such as that generated in Internet workshops, because they allow teachers or students to (1) provide commentary and reflections on recent events or daily happenings, (2) create online journals or diaries, and (3) easily publish their work. Blogs provide opportunities for authors to share information with others, who, in turn, can further the classroom dialogue and motivate student learning by posting responses in the form of “comments” to blog entries.

Organizational structure

In a social studies classroom, the teacher is the primary author and sole manager of the blog, but the teacher may invite students to contribute as authors to the classroom blog. The teacher controls the viewing options: blogs can be made private (e.g., accessible only by password) or public. Blogs are designed to include posts, pages, comments, and a *blogroll* (i.e., a list of other Web sites that are categorized and linked to the blog via hyperlinks). Blog *posts* (i.e., entries written by the teacher or students) are organized chronologically with the most recent entries appearing at the top of the Web page; the *pages* are organized according to teacher preference (e.g., alphabetical or topical) and are generally considered more permanent features of the blog site. Readers of the blogs are able to participate in electronic discourse by leaving responses (i.e., comments) on a post or a page. In essence, the Web audience is able to communicate to the author of the post or page through comments.

Finally, through the blogroll, teachers may include links to other blogs, content-specific Web sites, or child-friendly search engines such as Kids Click at <http://www.kidsclick.org/>. An example of a social studies curriculum specialist’s blog that offers many helpful tips and resources for teachers is <http://historytech.wordpress.com/>. Glenn Wiebe’s blog provides a place for educators to increase content area expertise in areas of both social studies and technology.

Publishing with blogs

Teachers can create classroom blogs as a place to publish student writing and showcase student projects, and by extension, develop student ownership (Richardson 2006a). By publishing student work, teachers increase the authenticity of student learning and increase the possibility of wider audience response beyond the local classroom community.

Publishing student work on Internet blogs creates opportunities for student writing to mature. Students will learn to write for many different audiences—both those “close at hand” and those farther away. Through increased experience, students increase their ability not just to write for themselves and their teachers but also for wider known and unknown audiences (Fountas and Pinnell 2001). In this final stage, the students do what professional writers often do by writing for a public that can only be imagined.

Elementary students’ motivation to produce quality, written work, their engagement in writing, and the time they invest in the writing process increase when they know their work will be published on the Internet (Karchmer 2001b). The effect of publishing student work online increases accessibility as viewers from around the world can potentially learn from the work, further increasing student motivation to produce quality work (Karchmer 2001a).

Classroom connections

We have collaborated with many classroom teachers who have created classroom blogs showcasing student work. Fourth-grade teacher Kelley Wilson, from North Carolina, created several social studies projects integrating social studies, language arts, and technology. Her students researched Cherokee Indians, pirates, and the three branches of the United States government. After completing Internet workshops and carefully organizing and analyzing their information, students transformed the social studies content and presented it through “I” poetry.

“I” poems are written in the first person where the poet assumes the identity of the poem’s subject. The author becomes the person, place, animal, or object about which he/she is writing. “I” poems provide the perfect innovation for informational poetry writing. After researching a self-selected topic or one with a curriculum-related focus, students are invited to write about the subject, include specific content (factual information) about the subject, and

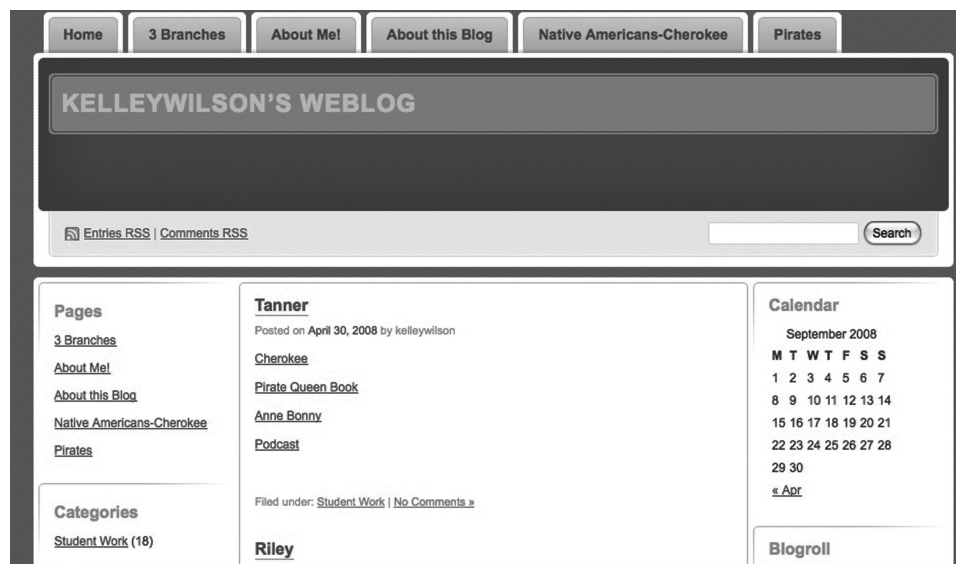


Fig. 4. Example of classroom blog interface.

develop a sense of wonder or curiosity about the subject through the use of poetic language and literary devices. Using a version of Levstik and Barton's (2005) "I Am" poem, students have a "built-in scaffold" that supports their transformation of information.

Mrs. Wilson published her students' "I" poems on the classroom blog she created with WordPress (<http://wordpress.com/>). After spending a great deal of time researching pirates (see Figure 2), the students chose a specific pirate to research further. Individually, the students composed and read aloud their "I" Poems to create a podcast by using the free audio editing software program Audacity (<http://audacity.sourceforge.net/>).

Students then formed small groups around pirates of their choice, researched the pirates, and wrote collaborative, digital stories. The poems, podcasts, and digital stories were published on the class blog, and each student had his/her individual post. (See Figure 4.)

Initially, students were researching relatively unfamiliar categories of information (pirates). Through collaborative classification, interpretation, analysis, and evaluation, students transformed the information and constructed new knowledge. They developed poems, podcasts, and digital stories that added to their understanding of events, ideas, and persons associated with piracy while meeting the criteria of valid social studies research (National Council for the Social Studies 1994). "I" poems encouraged deeper understanding of the information (Kucan 2007) by requiring the students to take the perspective of a pirate (see Figure 5), and this deeper learning often is reflected in the students' digital stories.

Figure 6 highlights digital storytelling focused on pirates Anne Bonny and Mary Reade. Digital stories are presented through computer-based, multimedia tools and

can include images (computer-generated or composed manually), text, recorded audio narration, video clips, and/or music. Such stories differ in length, but generally the presentation will last no more than ten minutes. Topics vary from personal stories to historical accounts. For a comprehensive resource on digital storytelling see <http://digitalstorytelling.coe.uh.edu/index.html>. In this

I Am Captain Kidd

By Michael

I am the unluckiest pirate to live.
 I was a privateer for the English.
 I hear the galley moving in the water.
 I see some French ships I could capture.
 I have a new ship called the *Merchant*.
 I am a person that leaves my family.

I wear a scarf, hat, and a belt when I take over a ship.

I was born in Scotland in 1645.
 I became a privateer in 1689.
 I am wealthy with good looks.
 I have a black mustache and a beard.
 I died because I lost my pardon papers.

I understand I was hung because I lost my paper.

I say I am the unluckiest pirate.
 I capture French ships a lot.
 I try to break the rope where I was hung.

I sailed to Madagascar where I buried my pieces of 8.

I buried my Bible with my pieces of 8.
 I am the unluckiest pirate to live.

Fig. 5. "I Am" poem.

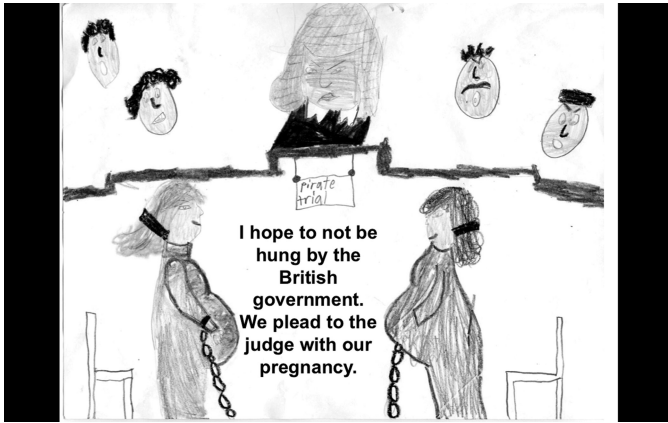


Fig. 6. Digital story slide—Pirate Queens: Anne Bonny and Mary Read.

example, a small group of fourth graders shared their “I” poems and the information gathered from their research; then, they collaboratively composed a digital story using Microsoft PowerPoint. This technology is easily accessible for both students and teachers. Also, blog software such as WordPress allows blog authors to upload different media files from different software programs such as Microsoft Word and PowerPoint. Note the social studies content embedded in both the poem and the digital story slide.

Blogs present the option for communicating directly and immediately with both students and parents. Teachers can post class assignments, links, schedules, and messages to parents. Parents may also choose to comment on posts or pages and offer their feedback and encouragement. Also, because teachers have a record or archive of everything posted, there are fewer questions about assignment directions or due dates.

Collaborative possibilities

Blogs provide a place where we can witness and participate in knowledge being socially constructed through collaborative electronic discourse. Teachers may ask students to respond to specific readings, writing prompts, photos, current events, and issues. Students can post their reactions to Internet workshops and offer opinions of social studies content discussed in class. The blog may also serve as a springboard for classroom discussions if students post responses on the blog before the “classroom” discussion.

To facilitate the “technical” aspects of students writing posts or comments to blogs, teachers may consider utilizing screen-recording software or screencasting with free programs like Jing (<http://www.jingproject.com/>) or purchasing professional software like Camtasia Studio (<http://www.techsmith.com/camtasia.asp>) that produces higher-quality videos. Both of these programs run on both Mac and PC platforms. Such software enables the user to capture onscreen activity, record voices, and video with a

webcam—showing instead of telling an audience. For example, teachers can create a video of *how* to create a post, leave a comment, and even upload files to the blog; then, teachers would upload the video screencast to the blog. This would be an invaluable resource to students who may simply forget the steps in completing the above tasks.

Several Web sites offer daily news on current events and issues that are written for children. Two sites we have found informative and child-friendly are *Time for Kids* (<http://www.timeforkids.com/TFK/>) and *Kids Post—The Washington Post for Kids* (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/kidspost/orbit/kidspost.html>).

How might reading and responding to current events look on the blog? The process could begin with the writing of a post where the teacher directs students to sites covering issues such as a current election, the state of the U.S. economy, or the recent raids on ships by Somali pirates. Students would critically read and evaluate the articles and then post their responses on the blog. The teacher or classmates could then analyze and evaluate the comments, respond with another post or comment, and in doing so, shape that previous knowledge and present a new perspective. Through this recursive process of visiting and revisiting blog posts, there is potential for an increase in shared meaning and understandings (Richardson 2006b).

Teachers may also consider ways of scaffolding students’ responses to the blog. For example, as students read current events, teachers may direct students to summarize the article addressing *who*, *what*, *where*, *when*, *why*, and *how*, write a personal reaction to the article, and make any possible connections (i.e., text to text, text to self, text to world) to the article.

Conclusion

We have described an instructional framework that, as suggested by the NCSS Position Statement in Technology, invites teachers to create technology-enhanced learning environments and instructional strategies that are meaningful, safe, and supportive of students in collaborative reading, researching, writing, publishing, and responding to social studies projects (National Council for the Social Studies 2006).

Internet workshops provide opportunities for teachers to manage technology resources within the context of research activities. Students and teachers can critically evaluate the accuracy of information on the Web as they collect, organize, analyze, and share relevant social studies content. Because the Internet sites are bookmarked by the teacher, random surfing is eliminated, therefore maintaining safe technology use and efficient use of instructional time.

As teachers engage in queries about Internet policies for their schools, parents should be informed of expectations and made aware of precautions that are in place to ensure the safety and privacy of their children. For example, many

teachers only publish students' first names or even create pseudonyms when publishing student work. Securing the proper permissions from parents and schools is essential. Many schools create acceptable use policies that include Internet publishing.

As students complete their Internet investigations, they transform the information gathered and compose a variety of written, oral, and artistic products. Writing tasks in which learners manipulate ideas lead to less memorization of information and greater depth of understanding. When teachers use digital tools to support students in researching, evaluating, organizing, transforming, writing, and publishing what they learn for a wider audience, they are encouraging students to write with a purpose, an authentic voice, and to create a meaningful representation of their learning.

The Internet expands easy access to resources where students can find information about relevant topics. Tools such as Google Maps and Google Earth provide a means for students to learn geography in ways that are more exciting and memorable because of their immediacy, quality, and flexibility in addressing personal questions. PowerPoint, blogging software, and podcasting are three tools that allow for easy public display of learned information. These tools expand the possibilities for learning activities in the social studies classroom and at the same time require teachers to structure lessons so that they can meaningfully harness these abundant resources.

The NCSS urges educators to design technology-enhanced experiences that address social studies content standards and student technology standards (National Council for the Social Studies 2006). We use Internet workshops as structures for students to meaningfully research social studies content, and we use blogs as a technological tool to publish and showcase authentic student work, and ultimately, to develop students' higher-order thinking skills and creativity. Internet workshops and blogs are learning tools that provide the opportunity to research and publish instantly, to connect widely, and to participate in real-life applications of literacy, social studies, and technology integration.

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